THE TRANSFORMATION OF MASSACHUSETTS

BY

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ONE who came recently to Massachusetts from the Rocky Mountain region remarked, "Massachusetts has some of the advantages of Adam: she started first." While less literally true of Massachusetts than of Adam, the statement has some bearing on our theme. Try to see a few pictures.

I.

1620-1920

"Behold, I make all things new."

"The breaking waves dashed high
On a stern and rockbound coast,"

not only in December, 1620, but for a long while after that. Yet something more than waves and rocks was continually in evidence. First, a little group battling with famine and disease, and almost but not quite losing the battle. Then, an established community, small but reasonably secure and decently prosperous. After that, the Colony of Plymouth, with its grouped towns, its free life, its thriving business.

Next comes the union with the Massachu-

setts Bay Colony, so that the political entity is the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, which, instead of any King, God is officially implored to save, in all public proclamations. The "Old Colony" becomes henceforth only a colloquial name with no definable reality to correspond to it. At this stage of its life, Plymouth is a typical New England community, with its traditions and its opinions—a town of one great church, whose congregation are all descended on at least one side from the Mayflower group, or from those who followed hard after the Pilgrim company. Such a Plymouth one sees in the stories of Jane Austin, or resurrects from the collected articles in Pilgrim Hall.

It is a resurrection from beneath a mass of change. The forty-one voters whose names are attached to the famous "compact" of the Mayflower cabin have become twenty-five hundred. Hunting and trading with the Indians would offer small prospect of ability to conquer the high cost of living. The port of Plymouth is comparatively of far less importance than it was in the earlier day. The Pilgrim fathers could no longer be sure that they might maintain on this

lonely shore their beloved language and their own chosen church without the let and hindrance that come from rivalries and competitions. The community is composite. Nationality is mixed. One-third of the thirteen thousand folks in Plymouth were born in foreign lands, and only a little more than thirty-five per cent. of the people are of stock that has been native for three generations. Religion is mixed. Where the Pilgrims maintained their one democratic pastorless church, no less than thirteen denominations are established. Outlying towns and villages have often split up in the same way. Struggling, striving, pushing, hauling, such churches too often make of their denominational shibboleths a penny wherewith to hide the sun from their eyes. It is interesting and significant that the one church in Plymouth that is commonly spoken of by name rather than by denominational connection is the Church of the Pilgrimage, spiritual successor of the Mayflower passengers.

The modern town of Plymouth occupies itself chiefly with manufacturing. Over half the people who are engaged in gainful occupation derive their income from this

kind of work. Some of the most famous and profitable enterprises in the United States are located here. All the problems of the modern industrial community naturally and inevitably exist—the mixture of races, the diversity of economic conditions, the variations of religion and irreligion, the clash or the chasm between idealism and materialism, between the traditionalist and the radical modern. Surely no one who prizes the Pilgrim heritage can think of these things without squaring his shoulders and setting himself for the defense of the things he holds dear.

II.

1756-1919

"Establish the things that remain."

When you compare the eight thousand two hundred and sixty-six square miles of Massachusetts with the two hundred and sixty-five thousand, eight hundred and ninety-six square miles of Texas, the old Commonwealth looks small. But Massachusetts has within fifteen per cent. or so as many people as Texas has. Except Rhode Island, it is the most densely populated of the American commonwealths.

Small as she is, she is packed tight with human life. That is, she is packed tight in spots! The hill country is different. The Denver man, looking away from the majesty of the Rocky Mountains on his mile-high edge of the great plain, may think that Greylock's thirty-three hundred feet fit it for a fairly good tee for a golf ball. But if you have to climb those thirty-three hundred feet, or half of them, you think of something more strenuous than golf. Getting up a "Jacob's Ladder" is a discouraging experience in some seasons of the year, and keeping the ladder in shape for smooth going is even more discouraging.

Close to the southeastern corner of the Bay State's hilliest county is an abandoned cellar hole. Here once stood the First Church of Christ in Sandisfield. It was organized in 1756, and proceeded with promptness and efficiency to the business of eighteenth century churches: to wit, the training of men in the ways of righteousness, peace and prosperity. It sent out pioneers to settle the prairies. It contributed leading citizens to the villages and cities that sprang up in the valleys. It produced at least one lieutenant governor of the Com-

monwealth. It was a brotherly church, too. Eight years after the Sandisfield pioneers located on their hill-top, another group of travelers came over the hills and found a broad basin to which they gave the name of Pittsfield. In course of time, they began the building of a meeting-house, and the Sandisfield folk hastened to lend a hand. A collection of more than three hundred dollars was taken and sent to aid the First Church of Pittsfield to build a house to the glory of God.

One hundred and fifty years or so after that collection was taken, lightning struck the Sandisfield meeting-house. It had been left stranded for years by the passing by of the railroad to other places. Meanwhile, Pittsfield had become a busy manufacturing city, with a population increasing by leaps and bounds. Its First Church now raises and expends on local work and missionary outreach nearly or quite twenty thousand dollars a year. But the lightning left only a cellar hole on the hill where its elder sister had stood.

The cellar hole is not all. The new church was built on a new site. As the older families died out or moved away, new

people came. Some of them were Jews, who clung to their faith and were too prejudiced against the name of Christ to give the church a ready opportunity; but some were of a different sort. The present clerk of the church bears a Finnish name, though she does her work in the spirit of New England's best traditions. Though only ten resident members are on the roll of the church, it still holds its place as the spiritual center of the little community.

If you measured churches as you do factories, a church of ten members, with no clear prospect of growth, would have to be sent to the scrap-heap. But let it go there, and there is grave danger that sooner or later another decadent community will act as a moral fester in the body politic. The Home Missionary Society makes no apology for using part of Pittsfield's twenty thousand dollars to help Sandisfield "carry on."

III.

1820-1920

"From weakness were made strong."

Not many miles below Northampton, an ancient overflow of lava from the volcano now called Mount Tom pushed the Con-

necticut River a mile to the east of a due north and south course, producing a sort of promontory which slopes quite steeply from high ground in the center to the banks of the river. At the end of the eighteenth century a group of settlers formed on the high land what was known as the Ireland Parish of West Springfield. They organized a Congregational church, but the presence of a resourceful group of Baptists led to the organization almost immediately of a church of that denomination, also. For a quarter of a century the two churches united in supporting Baptist pastors. In 1823, however, there were those who were restless under such an arrangement, and the Domestic Missionary Society of Massachusetts sent a worker into the field for eight weeks, the expense being met by gifts made for that special purpose.

Four years later the churches divided, the Baptists building a new meeting-house and the Congregationalists continuing in the old building, of which it was said that it was owned by both denominations together and would bless the world more if reduced to ashes than if suffered to stand. Out of a population of five hundred, the Congrega-

tionalists claimed fifty families to the Baptists thirty-five, but the Baptists had the greater wealth, the total valuation of the property of the Congregationalists being between fifty and sixty thousand dollars. Not only had this church no building of its own, but it had never had a Congregational pastor and had never kept any records.

The first mention of the work in a published report is presented by the Domestic Missionary Society in 1827. "The situation of this parish is interesting. The Congregational Church in it has received considerable accessions within two years, and several members express their opinion that the people will be able to support the ministry there, with the aid of seventy-five dollars per ann. from this Society." The several members were too sanguine, however, for though their suggested amount was not exceeded for a year or two, one hundred dollars a year was soon found to be necessary for the support of a minister. When one finds it reported that the pastor received from the field two hundred dollars, it is seen that he did not work for great gain even at the larger figure.

By 1840, however, the church was able to

go alone, except for a small lift in 1850, just as the great change came to the community it served. Down in the river bottom, where the falls of South Hadley came pouring over the rocks, men had at last succeeded in building a dam and drawing the water stored above it back and forth across the lava promontory in an S shaped canal. A railroad was built to connect this site with the newly extended Boston and Albany Railroad, and the opportunity of developing a new industrial community was offered. In 1848, the home missionary was at work at "Ireland Depot," though but little is said about the nature and success of his work. By 1850, however, we find mention of "Holyoke, the name recently given to the 'New City' on the Connecticut River. Among the three thousand or four thousand souls already gathered in this rival to Lawrence and Lowell, a Congregational Church of about twenty members was organized during the past year, but they cannot as yet sustain a minister without missionary aid." The next year the church is properly named as the Second Church in Holyoke, and comment is made as follows: "By reason of the stagnation of business in this new man-

ufacturing 'city,' many of the most reliable members have removed." In 1852 we read, "By a great effort the Society have paid off their debt, and sustained preaching, having received some aid therein from the Manufacturing Company and other benevolent individuals." "The pulpit has been supplied chiefly by the professors of Amherst College," is the next year's note. "When the new meeting-house, now going up, is completed, a permanent ministry will be sustained without aid from this Society." For four years this prediction seemed to be in process of smooth fulfillment, but the church appears again in 1857, where we are told, "This church, founded, and for years fostered, by the funds of this Society, has been brought back to its former dependence on missionary aid, solely by depression of manufacturing interests in the place." This dependence continued for no less than eight years, during which there is mention of much fluctuation of business and instability of the population. Ten years from the founding of the church only two of the original members were left. Sectarian movements drew some away, the charge being made that pecuniary considerations were

sometimes used to accomplish such a result. One pastorate was wrecked and another begun before the last appearance of the church in the aided lists, in 1864.

1919 finds Holyoke secured, as well as diversity of business and accumulation of resources can secure any city, against the sort of depression that threatened the life of the city and the church in the middle of the nineteenth century. The "Ireland Parish" church, moved from its rural surroundings to the center of the residence district of the city, maintains its ministry to the community in a fine brick edifice, by means of the interest, the devotion and the gifts of more than five hundred members. The church of "about twenty" has grown until it can report one thousand three hundred and seventy-five members; while Grace Church, organized as a branch of the Second Church, and still part of the same corporate organization, includes one thousand and eighty-five more. Situated on the main business street of the city, with a plant soon to be reconstructed into ideal fitness for diversified service, with generous appropriations for maintaining an adequate staff of workers, with a large proportion of its

membership giving time and thought to the interests of the Kingdom of God, at home and abroad, the Second Church justly claims place among the leading churches of our order.

Successes like these can hardly await many of the churches of the old Commonwealth now looking for and receiving the help of their more prosperous sisters. But the transformation wrought in changing Holyoke from a lonely height to a busy city is typical of Massachusetts history. In such places lie our problems, in such places our opportunities, in such places, to some extent, thank God, our successes.

THE CONGREGATIONAL HOME
MISSIONARY SOCIETY

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